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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: NINO BURJANADZE, THE CONSTANT GARDENER

REF: A. A. TBILISI 1101
[B. B. TBILISI 1933](#)
[C. C. TBILISI 1675](#)
[D. D. TBILISI 1370](#)

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mark X. Perry for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: One of the few constants in the Georgian political landscape over the past decade has been Nino Burjanadze. Since her election to Parliament in 1995, Burjanadze has emerged as one of the most moderate voices in Georgia, a reformer with credibility at home and abroad. Both her ascent and her political longevity have not been without obstacles, as Burjanadze has long taken fire in the Georgian press for the wealth and personal connections of her family. Pundits believe the Speaker of Parliament, whose leadership was instrumental during the Rose Revolution, is now fighting to maintain her relevance among the strong personalities surrounding President Mikheil Saakashvili and within the National Movement. In spite of the current political environment which limits her maneuverability, Burjanadze has not only survived, but prospered in the face of adversity. By defending her independence and cautiously distancing herself from other majority leaders, the Speaker of Parliament has adopted a strategic, long-term perspective on her political future. Remaining moderate domestically and carefully cultivating her international image -- often through her tough but calm stance against Russia -- has enabled Burjanadze not only to remain popular, but to position herself for the post-Saakashvili era when the political headwinds she faces may not be as strong. End Summary.

Digging up Dirt

[1](#)2. (C) Nino Burjanadze's rise through the ranks to the forefront of the Georgian political scene represents a considerable achievement in the male-dominated culture of Georgia. Burjanadze received her doctorate from Moscow State University and became a professor of international law at Tbilisi State University prior to entering politics. Her qualifications notwithstanding, Burjanadze has been dogged by criticism throughout her career. The Speaker of Parliament has never escaped scrutiny for the wealth and personal connections of her family. She is the only child of Anzor Burjanadze, a longtime friend of former President Shevardnadze's and "bread czar" of Georgia. Other family members and friends have been able to trade on her name to receive lucrative posts, fueling public charges of nepotism. Burjanadze has steadfastly defended her husband Badri Bitadze, former Prosecutor General and current Chief of the Border Guard Service, from widely believed allegations of corruption. Her public displays of expensive jewelry and couture have not gone unnoticed by both the public and the

diplomatic community (Note: Morning meetings with Burjanadze are exceedingly rare, as they reportedly conflict with her daily hairstyling appointment at an exclusive Tbilisi salon. End Note).

Cultivating an Image

13. (C) Despite projecting an image of sophisticated luxury which draws some critics (Note: Old political hands say that former mentor Zurab Zhvania repeatedly told Burjanadze to cut out the gold and jewels in public presentations. End Note.), Burjanadze remains popular in the eyes of the public. Recent IRI polling data reveals that 73% of respondents view Burjanadze favorably, up from 64% in 2006 and only four points behind the President's own rating. Sources believe Burjanadze's high esteem stems from her able stewardship of the Rose Revolution as interim President following the sudden resignation of Shevardnadze. This watershed moment solidified Burjanadze's reputation as one of the most moderate voices in Georgia, and boosted the Speaker's self-confident image. Burjanadze has parlayed this triumph by transforming herself into a public ambassador advocating Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations before the international community. While few legislators have sought to make her gender an issue domestically, politicians have trumpeted the success of such a high-ranking woman as proof of Georgia's European orientation.

14. (C) Burjanadze has established herself as a public face of Georgia in the eyes of the international community. In recent years, the number of high-level international visits made by the Speaker have been conspicuously on the rise.

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Burjanadze has used this elevated standing as a platform to criticize Russia over its deteriorating bilateral relationship with Georgia. Throughout the years, she has been outspoken over Russian involvement in Georgia's separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but she has done so with a light and effective touch. Many watched with pride as Burjanadze, emulating the tough yet dignified approach of her political hero Margaret Thatcher, calmly sparred with radical Russian Duma members last year during a CIS Parliamentary conference in Kyiv. Burjanadze appeared to be bitter, however, over what she judged to be a Russian campaign to torpedo her bid to become President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in the summer of 2006. Somewhat insulated in her role as Speaker of Parliament, she has since become increasingly combative in her rhetoric. Observers believe these moves to be tactical in nature; a close watcher of political polling, Burjanadze harbors lofty ambitions and is crafting her political strategy accordingly.

Pruning New Growth

15. (C) Many pundits believe Burjanadze's calculated, deliberate stance toward Moscow is an attempt to bolster her domestic credibility following her waning political influence at home. Immediately following the Rose Revolution, Burjanadze's team -- critical to the formation of the United National Movement -- was politically outmaneuvered by former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania during the 2004 parliamentary election. Awarded far fewer places on the party list than she originally bargained for, Burjanadze was effectively sidestepped by the kingmakers and relegated to a junior partner in the ruling triumvirate with Saakashvili and Zhvania. Since that time, Burjanadze has struggled to maintain her relevance amidst the coterie with immediate access to the President. Although Saakashvili regards the Speaker as a loyal -- though independent -- ally, his decision-making is influenced by party stalwarts within the ruling coalition including key parliamentarians such as Giga

Bokeria. Sometimes the Speaker defers questions to these individuals, in spite of her leadership position. Until recently, one of her principal supporters in Parliament was the outspoken Davit Bakradze, but he has now been named as State Minister of Georgia for Conflict Resolution. Still, it is clear that the Speaker has influence over the President, although her voice is one of many.

¶6. (C) Although she enjoys solid approval ratings both domestically and internationally, Burjanadze is currently not in a position to fully capitalize on her reputation. While Burjanadze is one of the most highly regarded politicians in Georgia, few would actually vote for her for President. In a 2007 IRI ballot test, only 7% indicated they would vote for Burjanadze, down from 11% the previous year. Poloff met with IRI Country Director Mark Lenzi to discuss these results, which suggest that Burjanadze has shifted toward a long-term perspective in a political culture otherwise dominated by the "win now" mentality. Lenzi noted that the winner-take-all election system for majoritarian MPs, wherein voters select one party rather than individuals, limits Burjanadze's maneuverability. The Speaker is propelled by the prevailing political winds of UNM, a current she can do little at present to influence.

Planting Tomorrow's Seeds

¶7. (C) Burjanadze's political skill and shrewd diplomacy have enabled her to not only survive these challenging times, but to position herself for the future. Recently, she has made cautious moves to distance herself from more vocal elements of the National Movement by subtly breaking with the party line in her public comments on recent developments. Burjanadze has called for increasing the oversight function of Parliament over state institutions to strengthen democratic checks on power, calling on the National Movement consider the international dimension of its dominance and to not misuse its popular mandate (reftel A). While other key figures of the UNM toed the line on the high-profile Girgvliani murder (reftel B), Burjanadze stood out alone in calling for further investigation into the politically charged case. She recently criticized the outspoken Minister of Education and Science Alexander Lomaia for his polarizing defense in Parliament against charges of corruption, an incident which led the President to publicly intervene in Lomaia's defense (reftel C). Such moves have allowed Burjanadze to solidify her credentials in the political middle ground. This independence may insulate her from the unfavorable headwinds she may face as the 2008 parliamentary

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elections approach.

¶8. (C) Comment. While her current role within the National Movement is somewhat circumscribed, it would be a mistake to dismiss Burjanadze. She appears to be looking ahead to the era after Saakashvili, who has no obvious successor. Her style contrasts sharply with that of other more divisive alternatives to Saakashvili, such as former minister of Defense Irakli Okruashvili, as well as that of relatively unpopular Saakashvili insiders like MP Giga Bokeria and Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili. By courting the middle both domestically and internationally, Burjanadze could emerge as a consensus builder and unifying figure in the eyes of the Georgian public, or a possible successor after Saakashvili's second term, especially if the only other alternative is the combative Okruashvili. End Comment.

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